

## CULTURE AND RELIGION



# Judaism

## Introduction

Judaism is the religion and the way of life of the Jewish people. It is the oldest of the monotheistic faiths in the Abrahamic tradition which include Christianity and Islam. The central principle of the monotheistic faiths is the belief in the one God: the all-knowing, all-powerful and ever-present creator of the universe.

The history of Judaism cannot be separated from the history of the Jewish people. There are about 14 million Jewish people in the world today and of these only 5 million live in the Jewish state of Israel. Over the centuries the Jewish people have been dispersed throughout the world, albeit still having a profound influence on humanity and civilisation.

English Jews were among the first European settlers in Australia and comprised the first non-Christian community to be established in colonial Australia.

## Background and Origins

Judaism originated with the biblical patriarch Abraham (approx 1800 BCE). Abraham established a covenant with God that was confirmed with the reception of the *Torah* (the Law including the Ten Commandments) from God through Moses to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai approximately 3,320 years ago.

It is important to recognise that as a result of changes since the general emancipation in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, there is now a great deal of diversity within Judaism both in religious and cultural expressions.

## Expressions of Judaism

Jews derive their Jewishness through either being born to a Jewish mother (for Reform Judaism, Jewish identity can be derived from either parent) or through conversion to Judaism under an orthodox Rabbinical court. Some individuals identify with Judaism as a personal choice. Judaism is mainly a communal culture and relies on family and community institutions to ensure continuity and manage membership.

For those who subscribe to Judaism as a religion, the central text is the *Torah* - the five books of Moses - the Law, containing 613 commandments expounded on by the *Talmud* - the Oral/Rabbinic Law. Religious expressions of Judaism believe that God is one, has no form, created the world, is eternal and is still actively involved in world affairs. Different streams differ in the degree to which the law can be interpreted and applied to modernity. Common religious streams of Judaism in Australia include: Orthodox, Reform (Progressive) and Conservative.

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Jews who identify culturally may be secular, agnostic, humanist, traditional, and may choose any combination of a range of cultural experiences as their focus including language, Israel, history, music, stories and Jewish cultural experiences from Europe, the Middle East or Spain and its former colonies. Little information is available about the affiliations of Jewish people in the Northern Territory.

The lack of community structures such as synagogues, illustrates that it is rare to find observant religious Jews as long-time residents of the Northern Territory. Most Jews in the Northern Territory adopt personal cultural expressions based on their own preferences and while they may hold small informal gatherings on festivals and on the Sabbath no communal structure exists.

The recitation of prayers, daily as well as on the Sabbath and Holy Days, is a defining characteristic of Jewish religious worship. The traditional Jewish prayer book is known as the *Siddur* and the oldest and most important of all Jewish prayers is the *Shemah*. The *Shemah* contains verses from the *Torah* and is an affirmation of Judaism and a declaration of faith. Observant Jews are obligated to recite the *Shemah* twice a day, morning and evening.

## Demographics

According to the 2006 Census, 88,832 people in Australia identified with Judaism as their religion, comprising 0.5% of the total population. Australia's Jewish population grows at the same rate as the general population. The figure for the Jewish population however may not include people who do not identify with Judaism as a religion and may also exclude those who refuse to answer the question on the grounds of privacy or fear of misuse of the information. Some estimates of the actual Jewish population in Australia are as high as 120,000.

The great majority of Australia's Jewish population lives in the two largest cities Melbourne and Sydney and there are established Jewish communities in other major cities in Australia. In the Northern Territory 120 people nominated Judaism as their religion in the 2006 Census.

## Greetings and Introductions

The following sensitivities may need to be observed on greeting or introduction:

- Observant orthodox Jews do not shake hands with members of the opposite sex.
- Some, when a hand is offered, will shake hands to avoid embarrassment to the person offering.
- Some Jews prefer not to be publicly identified as Jewish as a matter of privacy or through fear of misuse of this information. Respect for personal choice can be ensured by checking discreetly with the individual concerned.
- Given the diversity of Jewish expressions, it is prudent to check with the person how they would like to be introduced whether it is as: "A Jewish woman / man", "A member of the Jewish community" or otherwise.

## Names and Titles

- Although Jewish people are usually given Hebrew names at birth, e.g. David ben (son of) Abraham or Sarah bat (daughter of) Abraham, most Jewish people use their given names followed by their family name or surname.
- Jewish clerics are addressed with the title Rabbi followed by their family name.

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### Dress and Appearance

- Although in Australia the vast majority of Jews look and dress like other Australians, observant men will be bearded and wear a kippah (skullcap) at all times, during religious activities.
- Married orthodox Jewish women also cover their hair with a sheitel (a wig), a hat or scarf and observe a modest dress code.

### Food, Drink and Fasting

Recognising appropriate foods and beverages is essential in responding to the needs of religious communities. When hosting people from different religious and cultural backgrounds, as a matter of good practice; always serve a selection of vegetarian and meat foods on separate trays. A variety of non-alcoholic drinks should also be available at any official function. Although not all Jews follow the dietary laws, many follow some of them. The following issues relating to food, drink and fasting should also be understood:

- Jewish laws require that only proper ritually slaughtered meat may be eaten.
- Only fish which have both fins and scales are permitted to be eaten; shellfish are prohibited.
- Any food which contains substances extracted from forbidden meats or fish, for example oil and gelatine, is prohibited.
- Observant Jews do not mix meat and milk (or any dairy product) and keep separate crockery for each.
- Observant Jews have a number of fast days during the year associated with various festivals and historical events.

### Religious Festivals and Days of Significance

- The Sabbath (*Shabbat*) is the best known religious observance where Orthodox Jews undertake no secular activities from sunset on Friday to after dark on Saturday. For many Jews the Sabbath is meaningful and may be celebrated through family gatherings, quiet reflection, prayer and communal activities. Jewish people may choose not to attend community functions held on the Sabbath if they conflict with personal practices.
- Jewish Holy Days are celebrated on the same day of the Jewish calendar every year. The Jewish year follows a lunar calendar and the year is not the same length as a solar year on the Gregorian calendar used by most of the western world, so the dates vary each year. In the Jewish calendar, a day begins and ends at sunset, rather than at midnight so that all Jewish Holy Days begin on the evening before the date specified.
- The 8 day festival of Passover (*Pesach*) falls each year in March or April and involves a family or community gathering known as a Seder to commemorate the Exodus of Jews from Egypt and liberation from slavery in 1476 BCE; the seminal event in the history of the Jewish people. This Jewish festival is celebrated widely as a cultural tradition as well as a religious observance.
- An important observance is the "Days of Awe" period (falling in September/October) starting with New Year (*Rosh Hashanah*) commemorating God's creation of the world accompanied by individual reflection on the past year and the need for redemption, and ending with the fast-day of the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) ten days later.

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- The two days of Pentecost (*Shavuot*) in May/June, and the first two and last two days of the eight day festival of Tabernacles (*Succot*) usually in October are other religious festivals which may be observed by Jews in diverse ways.
- It should not be assumed that Jewish people celebrate Christmas or Easter. Many find it uncomfortable or insulting to be asked repeatedly what they are doing for Christmas. It is unfortunate that in the mainstream Australian community, many assume that everyone celebrates Christmas although it is a Christian festival.
- *Chanukah* or *Hanukkah* (also known as the “Festival of Lights”) is an annual Jewish festival celebrated on eight successive days in December on the Gregorian calendar. This festival of religious freedom and national survival commemorates the victory of the Jewish Maccabees over the Hellenist Syrians and the rededication of the Holy Temple of Jerusalem in 165 BCE.

## Language and Communication

- Jewish people usually speak the language of the country in which they live, although the language of prayer is Hebrew. Hebrew is also one of the 3 official languages of Israel so Jews who have lived in Israel generally speak Hebrew.
- Because of widespread dispersion over 2000 years, Jewish communities have existed in many countries the world over and many Jews are fluent in the language of their home countries.
- It is the policy of the Northern Territory Government to provide an interpreter where clients require assistance in English. Agency staff can contact the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) on telephone number 131450.
- It is important to avoid stereotypes and assumptions based on commonly portrayed Jewish characters in the media especially in American society.

## Family and Marriage

The differing family characteristics of different religious groups should be appreciated. These include:

- The family is an important unit in Jewish life. Respect for parents and grandparents is stressed. Many of Judaism’s rituals reflect this emphasis.
- Jewish marriage has a different process to other religion’s practices and each couple will choose the expression most comfortable for them.

## Medical

- When matters of health are involved, and in particular where there is a danger to life, most of Judaism’s religious laws and rituals are set aside because Jewish laws hold the patient’s wellbeing and the sanctity of human life in the highest value.

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### Death and Related Issues

Death and the grieving process are significant for all religious communities. It is important to note that while many Jews may not observe all the religious laws throughout their life, they or their families require strict observance of the law in relation to death and burial. Some important sensitivities include:

- The body at death must be treated with the utmost reverence as it was the body that housed the soul in life.
- As such, autopsies must be avoided and the body should be buried as quickly as practicable/possible.
- Wherever possible a Jewish Burial Society, (Chevra Kadisha) carries out the holy task of preparing the body for burial.
- Where possible, it is important that the Jewish departed are handled only by members of the Jewish faith.
- Jewish laws do not permit cremation. In some areas there are specially delineated Jewish sections of the cemetery.
- The recitation of the *Kaddish* (the mourner's prayer) is fundamental to mourning rituals in Judaism at funerals and memorial services for departed family members. The *Kaddish* expresses the mourner's faith and acceptance of God's will, even at the time of grief for the loss of a family member. The *Kaddish* is recited daily for the first eleven months for parents and thirty days for immediate family, and on the anniversary of the death.

### Counselling/interviews

- It is prudent to check if clients have any religious or cultural preferences for an interview or counseling session.

### Further Enquiries

This information sheet has been produced by the Office of Multicultural Affairs with input from Jewish people in the Northern Territory community.

For further information on orthodox Jewish laws please contact an orthodox synagogue in any of the other capital cities, see the following link for the Executive Council of Australian Jewry: [www.ecaj.org.au](http://www.ecaj.org.au)

For more information on Jewish subjects, issues and perspectives and resources from international centres, see: [www.chabad.org](http://www.chabad.org) and [www.aish.com](http://www.aish.com)

For further information on other Jewish matters please see the following link for Jewish community organisations in Australia: [www.jewishaustralia.com/community.htm](http://www.jewishaustralia.com/community.htm)